

Reading Agamemnon's mind in Euripides' *Hecuba*

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Why do the protagonists of Greek drama do the things they do? How are we to feel about their motivations? Are heroes and villains always easy to separate? Here Henry Spelman has us look again at Euripides' Agamemnon, and his exchange with Hecuba, wife of Priam.

Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, who is now to be led away to a life of slavery, learns that her Thracian guest-friend Polymestor has killed her son Polydorus and mutilated his body. The Greek general Agamemnon arrives on stage to find her weeping over her child's corpse. She falls at Agamemnon's knees and, taking the moral high ground, tries to persuade him to help her to take revenge on Polymestor:

if the law of the world (nomos) comes before you as a judge and then comes to nothing, and those who kill their guest-friends suffer no punishment ... then there is no justice at all in human life. Consider this shameful and respect my claim. (802–5)

As Hecuba speaks, Agamemnon gives some wordless gesture that reveals his thoughts. 'Where are you trying to escape to?' (812), the queen suddenly asks in alarm. As often when we are reading drama on the page, here we have to stage the text in the mind's eye in order to understand how word and action might combine to produce meaning. Perhaps Agamemnon now turns away from Hecuba, as Hecuba has just turned from Agamemnon (739). Perhaps he begins to push her away, as she feared that he might (742). Perhaps he retreats from her grasp, as Odysseus earlier retreated from Polyxena's grasp (342–5). Somehow or other by his physical reaction to her words Agamemnon gives Hecuba good reason to despair:

O wretched me—it seems that I won't succeed at all. (813)

The art of persuasion

Facing failure, Hecuba now reflects on 'Persuasion, the one and only absolute ruler over human beings' (816). She then tries a rather different sort of argument in

her second attempt at persuading Agamemnon:

my daughter Cassandra sleeps at your side ... How will you value those nights of pleasure, my lord? What return for her loving embraces in bed will my daughter have and what return will I have for my daughter? (826–30)

Hecuba's first speech focused on moral considerations that apply to all human beings; her second speech instead focuses on concerns of personal reciprocity that apply to Agamemnon in particular because of his sexual relationship with her daughter whom he has recently claimed as his prize in war.

Hecuba's first arguments fail; her second arguments are more successful as Agamemnon eventually agrees to help her take revenge on Polymestor. Hecuba doubted that mentioning Cassandra would help to convince Agamemnon (824–5), but this consideration evidently carries real weight with him. Indeed, earlier in the play he is said to take Hecuba's side because of his relationship with Cassandra (120–2, 127–9).

Divine justice

For Agamemnon, it seems, lofty moral considerations do not provide sufficient reason to help the wretched Hecuba. Yet when he explains himself in words, he claims to act because of the very motives which were the theme of her first, unsuccessful speech:

Ipity you, your son, and your suffering ... For the sake of justice and the gods, I want your unholy guest-friend to be punished. (850–3)

So far from admitting that he acts to please her daughter, Agamemnon mentions her only to disassociate himself from this motive: he is afraid that he might 'seem to

the Greek army to do this for the sake of Cassandra' (855).

Cassandra, as Agamemnon's concubine, would have a right to expect him to care for her interests. So, for example, in Sophocles' *Ajax*, Tecmessa, the concubine of Ajax, makes a moving plea for empathy from him. The important point for our play is that Agamemnon would be more admirable if he acted exclusively from the concern for divine justice which he claims to have. This is clear from how he articulates his own motivations and also from how he expects others to react if he did help Hecuba 'for the sake of Cassandra'.

Agamemnon says that he acts 'for the sake of justice and the divine', but he has shown that these motivations were not enough for him by silently refusing Hecuba's first plea. His words do not quite fit with his actions. What are we to make of this? Agamemnon is more opaque than any other character in this play. The difficulty that we find in interpreting Agamemnon also exists in the real world, where the motivations of real people are often hard for us to know for certain. We are constantly engaged in inferring the thoughts of others from their words and actions. This sort of 'mind reading' can be a difficult business, on stage and in life.

Mind reading

Agamemnon's words and actions challenge us to read his mind. Is he being deceitful when he claims to act 'for the sake of justice and the divine'? He is quite comfortable with deceiving the Greek army and proves successful in tricking Polymestor. Yet he has no obvious motive to be deceitful in this scene, for there is nobody on stage who needs to be deceived by him. Hecuba dangles his relationship to Cassandra as an acceptable motivation; he has no good practical reason to pretend that it is not.

If Agamemnon is not deceiving Hecuba, might he be deceiving himself? Can we understand Agamemnon better than he understands himself? When Agamemnon claims that he wants to help Hecuba for the sake of divine justice, perhaps he is not simply being deceptive but giving an incomplete account of his

motivations and turning toward the world that side of himself which he would most like the world to see. In other words, maybe Agamemnon is inauthentic but not contemptible. His attempt to flee Hecuba shows that, for him, lofty considerations of justice are not sufficient motivation; the rest of his conduct shows that these considerations do have some weight.

Agamemnon is no villain. Hecuba finds the leader of the enemy army to be less hostile than she fears that he will be (745–6). Agamemnon benefits from a comparison with Odysseus, the other Greek leader whom Hecuba earlier failed to persuade in a parallel scene. Odysseus convinced the Greeks to sacrifice Hecuba's daughter Polyxena and justified this gruesome deed to the mother of the sacrificial victim by appealing to a need for political order (303–12); Agamemnon enters the stage expressing moral misgivings about the death of Polyxena (731–2). Hecuba begged Odysseus for pity and found none when, as the chorus says, anyone would weep for her (296–8); Agamemnon expresses pity before Hecuba even requests his help (785). Odysseus acknowledges a personal obligation to Hecuba but denies her plea for help by citing more abstract considerations; in Agamemnon, by contrast, reasons of personal reciprocity and impersonal justice effectively combine to motivate action.

Complex realities

Agamemnon's mixed motives complicate our reaction to the final scene of the play. After Hecuba and her fellow Trojan women blind Polymestor and kill his children, the Greek general returns to the stage for an odd travesty of a trial: having already sided with Hecuba against Polymestor, Agamemnon now pretends to judge impartially between them. Here alone in Euripides the outcome of an extended debate is already decided in advance. At the end of the play the law does indeed come before Agamemnon as a judge and those who murder their guest-friends are indeed punished, as Hecuba hoped. Someone who slipped out of the theatre for a refreshment during Agamemnon's first scene with Hecuba might reasonably think that here he acts as an impartial and fair judge who, for the sake of the gods and what is right, upholds justice (albeit a brutal sort of justice). We, who know Agamemnon from his earlier scene, know that his motivations are in fact more complicated.

Let us imagine two alternative versions of the *Hecuba*. In one, a villainous Agamemnon cares nothing for justice and acts on exclusively ignoble motives — bribed by Hecuba, perhaps. In another version, a heroic Agamemnon acts purely

out of a desire to see justice done and immediately agrees to Hecuba's first speech. Euripides has not given us either of these simpler dramas. The world of his *Hecuba* is neither a dystopia in which justice does not matter at all to anyone, nor a world nobler than ours in which abstract moral considerations are the only thing that matters to everyone. In Agamemnon different sorts of motives combine in uncertain measures to produce acts which demand nuanced evaluation. One might recognise this opaque and impure world as rather like our own.

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